Survivor Guilt: Surpassing Siblings, Friends and Strangers

Lynn E. O'Connor
Emotion, Personality & Altruism Research Group
Wright Institute
Berkeley, CA

Jack W. Berry
Emotion, Personality & Altruism Research Group
Virginia Commonwealth
Richmond, VA

Eunice Yi
Emotion, Personality & Altruism Research Group
Wright Institute
Berkeley, CA

David Sloan Wilson
State University of New York
Binghamton University
Binghamton NY

Jeffrey Schloss
Westmont College
Santa Barbara CA

Nichole Kryla
University of California
Berkeley, CA

Therese Mascardo
University of California
Berkeley, CA

American Psychological Association 2004

Abstract

It is often assumed that people are eager to be the "winners" in social comparison and contests in life, however, our prior research on survivor guilt and psychological problems has consistently (and cross-culturally) shown quite the opposite; there is a downside to winning, and a high proneness to survivor guilt, that is guilt about surpassing others, is significantly linked to depression. As a highly social mammal, we live in large and stable social groups in part held together by mutual cooperation and sharing. Survivor guilt plays a part in this story; as a social emotion it serves as a proximate motivator, a part of the leveling mechanism holding our social groups together.

In the present study we presented 246 participants with a scenario in which the main character, a college student, was more successful than a second character, also a college student. There were three conditions; each differed only in the relationship that the second character had to the main character. In one condition he was a sibling; in the second he was a best friend; and in the third he was a stranger. The participants who each read one scenario, wrote narratives in response to questions about the scenario. These narratives were then rated by clinical psychologists, familiar with the constructs. Our results demonstrate that people are feel significantly more survivor guilt towards family and friends than towards strangers, however pleasure at achievement was inhibited across all groups. Men and women differed significantly in proneness to survivor guilt according to ratings. While there was no significant main effect for ethnic group, there was an interaction between ethnicity and experimental condition.

Introduction

Empathy-based altruism, a fundamental human motivation, has been somewhat concealed from psychology by the emphasis on the self-centered and negative factors in mental life, still favored by many in both the academic and professional branches of our field. Indeed many followers of Darwin and Freud alike continue to agree that people are driven by conscious and unconscious competition and aggression, whereas following a shifting paradigm, (Allman, Hakeem, & Watson, 2002; Kihlstom, 2001; Keltner, 2001; O'Connor, 2000; O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, & Gilbert, 2002; Singer, Kiebel, Winston, Dolan, & Frith, 2004; Weiss, 1993) and supported by contemporary cognitive science, we found in the clinic and empirical studies, the mind may be more prosocial and altruistic than previously considered.

For a decade we studied altruism indirectly, seen through the lens of interpersonal guilt, or worry about harming others. Using the Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ-67), we demonstrated significant correlations between an exaggerated sense of responsibility for the well-being of others, and depression and other psychological problems, verifying the importance of altruistic motivation in clients, even when shame, fear of negative evaluation, or other indicators of self-interest appeared on the surface to be more relevant to presenting problems. In numerous studies, data confirmed that worry about others predicted depression, when controlling for more self-centered concerns. We found survivor guilt particularly important, both in the clinic, and in our empirical investigations, and in addition our cross-cultural studies suggested survivor guilt might be a universal construct worthy of broader attention.

Survivor guilt is a subtle but common emotion, based on the belief that one will make others feel inadequate, simply by comparison, if one is successful in work, relationships, or other realms of life. People are often uncomfortable when they feel better off than others. For example when people surpass siblings or parents in occupational success, or in their choice of relationship partner, or when they see strangers begging on the street, there is a tendency to feel discomfort at the reality, or at the mere idea, that they are better off than others. As homo sapien has been shown to have a remarkable capacity to detect cheaters (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992), survivor guilt seems to be a form of "cheater detection turned inward." The ability to detect cheaters is a cognitive capacity, demonstrated to appear early in life, evolved in higher primates living in larger cooperative social groups in which sharing is a most adaptive strategy. Recently Brosnan and de Waal (2003) discovered a related leveling mechanism in monkeys, "inequity aversion:" Fairness, as manifested by internal rules and the discomfort of survivor guilt, operates in the daily life of college students, making it difficult for a student to enjoy success, when someone near them is failing.

In a new line of research we have begun to study study survivor guilt in ordinary life. While survivor guilt in its more exaggerated manifestations may lead to paralysis and even depression, it is so common and part of our daily lives, that we knew we could find it anywhere, and thus began in our own backyard. The present experimental study is part of this effort.

Methods

PARTICIPANTS

There were 152 women, 93 men and 1 unspecified as to gender participants in this study, all in a large psychology class at a major urban university. Ethnicities included: 83 (34.2%) European American; 70 (28.8%) Asian Americans; 39 (16%) Hispanics; 33 (13.6%) mixed, and a variety of other much smaller groups, which we did not use for data analysis due to group size. Ages ranged from 18 to 83, with the mean age of 20.62.

INSTRUMENTS

- The Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ-67; O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush & Sampson, 1997)
- The Interpersonal Guilt Rater's Scale
- The Dispositional Altruism Scale (DAS; Berry & O'Connor, 2003)
- The Interpersonal Reactivity Scale (IRS; Davis,
- The Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker, 2001)

PROCEDURES

We created three scenarios in which a college student who wanted to be a psychology major did very well in a psychology course, while someone else did badly. There were three conditions, with the identical scenario, the only difference being the relationship of the college student to a second college student in the story who did badly in the psychology course: In condition one, the student who did badly was an older brother (sibling); in condition two, the person was a close male friend; and in condition three, the person was a stranger who sat next to the student in the class.

Participants were each randomly assigned one scenario, along with the other questionnaires. The participant read the scenario then wrote a narrative in response to several questions we asked about the story

THE SCENARIO: FRIEND CONDITION

Joe is a second year student at State U. He is planning on majoring in Psychology, and hopes to go to graduate school. He hasn't yet decided if he will become a clinical or research psychologist. He's always enjoyed being with people, has many friends, and is often the person who friends seek out when they are upset and want someone thoughtful to talk to.

Joe is currently taking a class in abnormal psychology, and is in a study group with seven other students. One of his good friends, Robert, is also in the study group, and like Joe, Robert is hoping to major in psychology and to go on to graduate school. The study group met all semester, reviewing material, preparing for the quizzes, midterms and final exam. Joe knows that grades are important and he studies hard. He is worried about Robert because recently Robert has been distracted by a problem with his girlfriend, he doesn't seem to be studying much, and he's missed quite a few study group meetings. Joe suspects that Robert might be partying too much over the weekends.

A week after the final exam, results are posted outside the psych department office, before grades are sent out. Joe goes over to see how he did, and was relieved to see that he scored in the top 1% of the class. However, he noticed that Robert scored below the 50% mark. **THEN WE ASKED THESE QUESTIONS:**
Please describe all the thoughts and feelings that you think Joe might have had, as he looked at the exam results. Then describe what you think Joe might do,after seeing the results.

Results

NARRATIVE RESPONSES TO SCENARIOS AS RATED BY CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGISTS

Two trained clinical psychologists, working independently, read each narrative and rated them on a Likert-type scale for the degree to which the responses reflected expressions of survivor guilt. The reliability of the two clinicians' ratings was .78. The average of the two raters was used as the final survivor guilt rating.

SAMPLE RESPONSES

AT-079
Since Joe is known for having care for other people, he is probably feeling pretty rotten right now as almost as if his accomplishment means nothing because Robert has failed. Now he will probably go and comfort and offer to help him out.

AT-145
Joe's initial response would be a feeling of joy and satisfaction over the result of his good grade. However, upon the discovery of Robert's grade, Joe would feel a sense of guilt. Joe was aware of Robert's current problems and did or said nothing to help him. Joe would feel as though he had the opportunity to help, but was too involved in his own business to stop and help others, thus guilt would set in.

AT-058
I feel that Joe could have tried to help Robert more in his studies. Maybe Joe could have asked Robert to talk about his problems or Joe could have had a talk with Robert about partying too much. This could have improved his studying habits and it also could have shown Robert that Joe cares about him.

Analysis of variance were used to compare survivor guilt ratings between experimental conditions (family, friend, or stranger scenarios) and between genders and ethnic groups of participants. There was a statistically significant main effect for the scenario condition ($p < .001$). Post hoc comparisons found that survivor guilt ratings were significantly lower in the stranger scenario than in either the family or the friend scenario. There was also a significant main effect for gender ($p < .01$), with female participants rated significantly higher in survivor guilt than male participants across scenarios. Mean survivor guilt ratings for men and women are shown in Table 1 for each scenario.

We compared survivor guilt ratings to the scenarios among three ethnic groups: European Americans, Latin Americans, and Asian Americans. There was no significant main effect for ethnicity, but there was a significant interaction between ethnicity and experimental condition ($p < .05$). Table 2 shows mean survivor guilt ratings for each ethnic group according to scenario. The significant interaction was due to the much lower survivor guilt ratings in the stranger scenario for the European American participants.

QUESTIONNAIRE (IGQ-67) RESULTS

Participants' narrative responses as rated by experts correlated with participants scores on IGQ subscales of Survivor Guilt ($r = .16$, $p = .04$) and Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt ($r = .19$, $p = .01$) subscales of the IGQ-67. This suggested that the IGQ-67, used in prior studies as a measure of guilt-proneness, was predictive of how participants behaved in a particular situation.

The three ethnic groups were compared on the subscales of the IGQ-67. There were no significant differences on Omnipotent Guilt but the Latin American (Hispanic) group was significantly lower on Survivor Guilt than both the European American and Asian American participants. Means of the ethnic groups on Survivor Guilt are shown in Table 3.

Males and females were compared on the IGQ-67 subscales. Females were significantly higher than males on Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt ($p < .05$). There was no significant difference between males and females on Survivor Guilt. Correlations were computed between the IGQ-67 subscales and the Family, Friend, and Strangers subscales of the Dispositional Altruism measure. Survivor Guilt did not correlate significantly with altruism, either in the entire sample or among females or males separately. Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt, however, correlated significantly with altruism to family and friends among males, but not among females.

THE LINGUISTIC INQUIRY WORD COUNT (PENNEBAKER)

A mean word count demonstrated no differences between participants' responses in length, according to condition. According to the LIWC, (See Table 4) there were no differences between the conditions in affect in general. However, there were significantly more negative affect works mentioned with siblings than with strangers ($p<.05$); there were significantly more anxiety words mentioned with siblings siblings that with friends and strangers ($p<.05$); there were significantly more sadness words with siblings than with friends and strangers ($p<.05$); there were significantly more positive affect words with strangers than with siblings and friends ($p<.05$); and there were significantly more inhibition words with friends than with brothers and strangers ($p<.05$).

POSITIVE EMOTIONS FROM THE EYES OF STUDENT RATERS

In another rating task, two relatively untrained psychology students read a subsample of 87 random narrative responses independently. They each found no significant differences between the three conditions, in the lack of expression of positive emotion, One rater found 35% of this subset of responses and one rater found 38% of this subset expressed no positive emotion whatsoever, despite the scenarios describing the main character's great personal success.

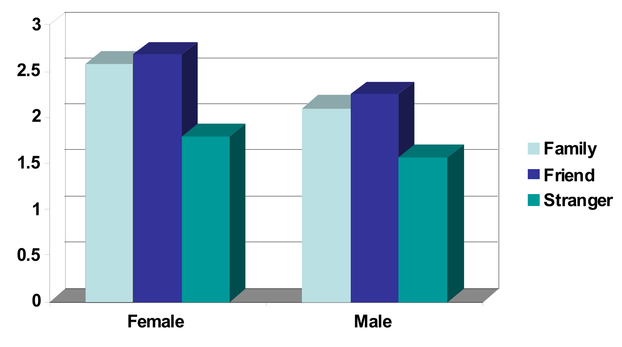

Table 1
Ratings of Survivor Guilt in Response to Scenarios: Gender Comparisons

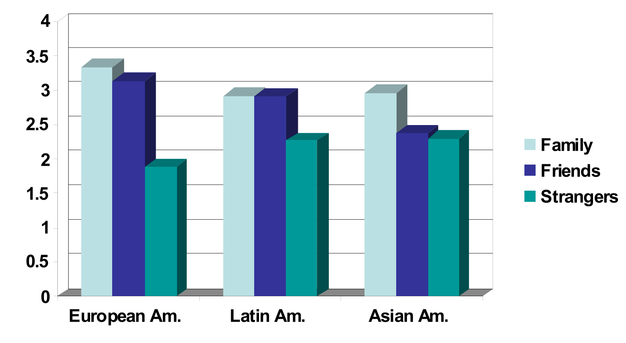

Table 2
Ratings of Survivor Guilt in Response to Scenarios: Ethnic Group Comparisons

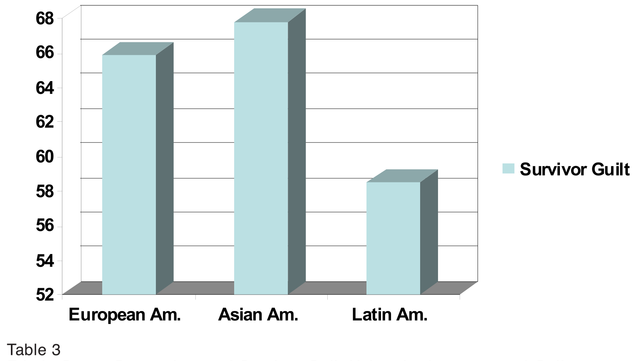

Table 3
Ethnic Group Comparisons of Survivor Guilt Using the Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire-67

Linguistic References	Experimental Condition: Brother (B)	Friend (F)	Stranger(S)	Group Differences
Family	2.6	0	0	B>F&S
Friends	.19	1.24	.46	F>B&S
Affect	6.2	5.6	5.9	No Difference
Negative Emotion	3.6	2.8	2.1	B>S
Anxiety	1.1	.39	.28	B>F&S
Positive Emotion	2.5	2.8	3.7	S>B&F
Social	19.1	15.5	13.3	B>F>S
Other	12.2	9.7	8.6	B>FS
Inhibition	.24	.44	.18	F>B&S

Table 4
The Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (Pennebaker)

Discussion

The results of this experimental study of college students' feelings during a relatively common situation in their daily life suggests that survivor guilt, broadly defined, is an emotion that extends well beyond the areas in which it has been considered and empirically studied: It has been thought of as a feeling people have in the wake of the death of a loved one, or a proneness to a general guilt-state associated with psychopathology. Instead, these results demonstrate that survivor guilt is a common emotion that may lead to inhibition of pleasure, even at the moments of great achievement, at the moments of winning in social comparison. Survivor guilt appears to be a cross-cultural and cross-gender emotion, and to serve as a mechanism by which social groups maintain a degree of equality. Survivor guilt serves as a proximate motivating for sharing, a necessary part of the economic life of ours and several other higher ape species. The larger evolutionary purpose we suggest relates to holding the larger, more stable homo sapiens social group together, and indeed this emotion seems to be most highly developed in our species. Survivor guilt is subtle; we often don't know we feel it, until we have done something to bring ourselves down a bit, to "level the playing field," to make things more "equal."

This study suggests that we feel significantly more survivor guilt when we feel better off than a family member, but we also feel responsible and even guilty when we surpass a stranger. Many of our participants, when speaking of the student they did not know, said things like "I should have found a way to help him." This seemed to us quite remarkable, about our fundamental human motivations, and how far psychology has been from understanding human motivation, as it has focused so heavily on our self-centered interests, which may be more often on conscious, while our concern about others may be just under the surface, and less accessible to our conscious cognitive processes. Recent work in neuroscience may support this.

The results of this study support the evolutionary hypothesis that empathy-based altruism is extended to family and friends, based on inclusive fitness theory and reciprocal altruism. However while there were significant differences in the amount of survivor guilt measured using multiple methods, in response to siblings (inclusive fitness) and friends (reciprocal altruism) than towards strangers, we found extensive discomfort, inhibition of joy at achievement, when in the stranger condition. This counters the evolutionary hypotheses for altruism and suggests that multilevel selection theory might be considered in our efforts to understand survivor guilt. We suggest that proneness to survivor guilt in modest degree, may not only serve to improve individual fitness, but may also be important in between group competition.

EPARG
Emotion, Personality and Altruism Research Group
2728 Durant Avenue
Berkeley, CA 94704
http://65.205.237.47/wright/EPARG/